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Divided by history: why Japan-South Korea ties have soured

The trade spat has as much to do with 20th century events as global supply chains

Robin Harding in Tokyo and **Edward White** in Seoul October 24 2019

In October 1998, the then president of South Korea visited Japan to hear an apology. Kim Dae-jung had grown up under Japanese colonial rule, obliged to adopt a Japanese name, and serve a Japanese company. He knew the bitterness of foreign domination.

In a statement negotiated between the two sides, then Japanese prime minister Keizo Obuchi — a mainstream conservative — spoke of his country's "deep remorse and heartfelt apology" for the harm caused during its brutal occupation from 1910 to 1945. Kim, one of South Korea's first truly democratic presidents, accepted the apology.

"It is infantile to regard 1,500 years of exchanges and co-operation as insignificant because of unfortunate periods that totalled fewer than 50 years," he said. Kim later won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work of reconciliation with North Korea and other neighbours.



Former Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi with then South Korean president Kim Dae-jung during the football World Cup in Seoul in 2002, when it seemed that colonial bitterness would fade into the past

South Korea quickly removed its ban on Japanese films, tourism boomed and in 2002 the two countries became the first ever co-hosts of the football World Cup. Colonial bitterness, the leaders of both countries hoped, would fade gently into the past.

Today, those hopes lie in tatters: Japan and South Korea seem unable to escape the events of the first half of the 20th century. Last November, under President Moon Jae-in, South Korea shattered the status quo by failing to step in after its courts awarded damages against Japanese companies for using wartime forced labour, in the face of a 1965 treaty that resolved all claims related to the occupation.

Shinzo Abe, Japan's prime minister, equally, has torn up the diplomatic playbook by taking the spat into the economic sphere, slapping export controls on chemicals vital to the Korean semiconductor industry. The dispute is escalating, with no obvious way out. In response to the export controls, Seoul quit an intelligence-sharing deal with Japan. Still looming is the threat that Korean courts will liquidate the assets of Japanese companies, prompting retaliation from Tokyo. Economic and security relations between the two most important US allies in Asia — both vital links in the global technology supply chain — are at risk of total breakdown.

Korean funds are reviewing holdings in Japanese companies, consumers are boycotting Japanese brands and the government in Seoul has touted a \$6.5bn plan to reduce its reliance on Japan-made parts, materials and equipment. The potential impact on South Korea's computer chip manufacturers has raised fears of global disruption.

The question is how it came to this. The second world war ended 74 years ago and is passing from living memory. Japan and South Korea, now among the richest democracies in the world, are unrecognisably different to what they were then. Yet their relationship remains unusually fraught.

Japan gets on well with Taiwan, which it colonised, and with south-east Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, which suffered a merciless occupation. Demands for war reparations occasionally taint Germany's relations with countries such as Greece, but never to the exclusion of all else, while Britain's colonial legacy — which includes plenty of brutal behaviour — seldom hampers its current diplomacy.

Something makes the relationship between Japan and South Korea an exception. The reasons for that are complex, but it is in Seoul, more than in Tokyo, that the answers are to be found.



A Twitter post shows Korean pop star Bae Su-ji holding a phone case made in support of the Korean 'comfort women' forced into sexual servitude for Japanese soldiers during the second world war © Twitter - @SUZYSTYLE9410

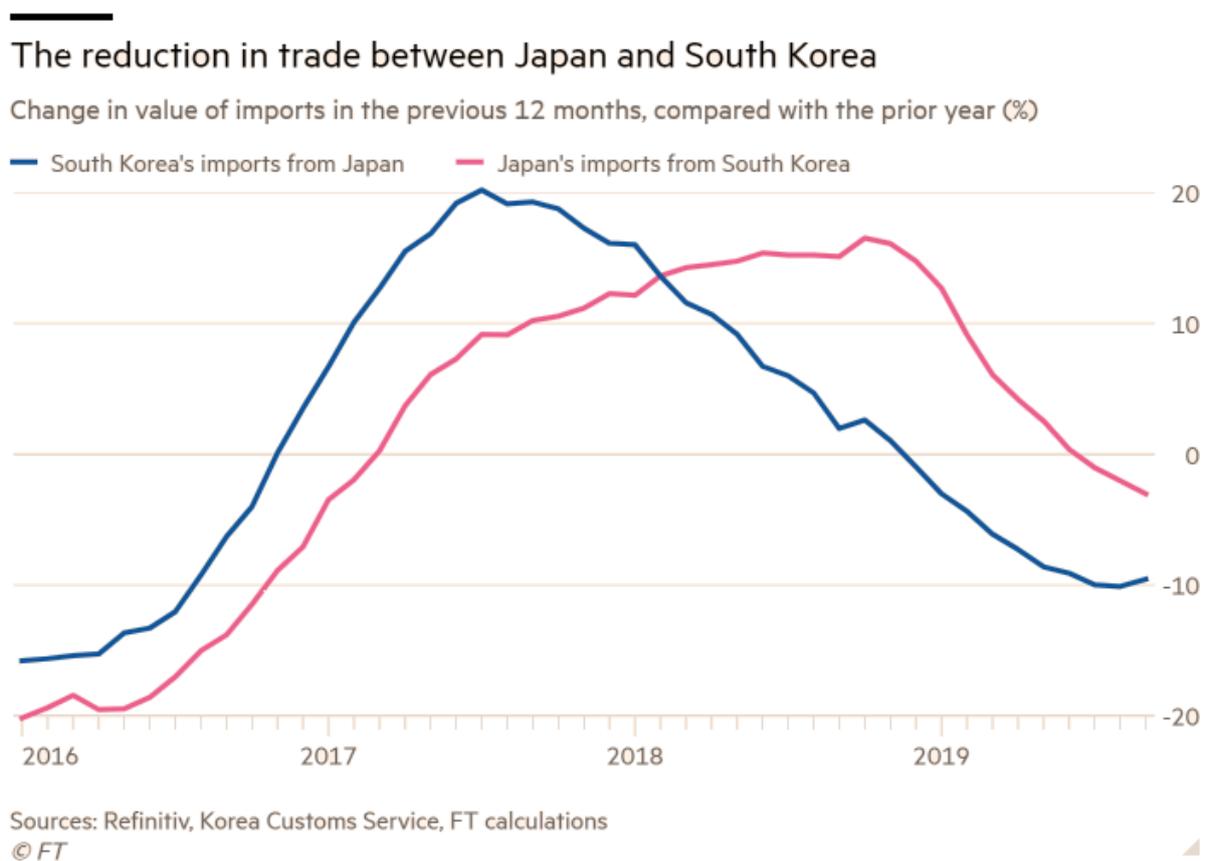
Marymond, a small design company in South Korea, makes fashion accessories emblazoned with flowers to represent the “comfort women” who were forced into sexual servitude for Japanese soldiers during the second world war, donating a portion of its profits to advocate groups.

The company's sales jumped more than fivefold from 2015 to 2017 after a photo went viral of Bae Su-ji, a Korean pop star, holding one of the company's phone cases amid

public uproar over the latest attempt to settle historical accounts: a 2015 deal, involving another apology and compensation, which both Tokyo and Seoul declared was a “final and irreversible resolution” of the issue.

Now the products are regularly shown off by the biggest K-pop idols, including boy band BTS. “Customers thank us, saying they had wanted to do something for the grandmothers,” chief executive Reena Hong says at the weekly demonstration outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul. “Primary school students supported the grandmothers here today — that was unthinkable when I was in school,” she says.

A crucial, largely unforeseen, factor underpinning Mr Moon’s hardline stance on Japan has been the widespread adoption of the comfort women and forced labour issues by a new generation of South Koreans. Few would speak out against the women or their demands and before his election in 2017 Mr Moon campaigned on a pledge to renegotiate the 2015 agreement.



Lauren Richardson, an expert in Korea-Japan relations at Australian National University, says successive Japanese policymakers and leaders never imagined the whole of South Korean society would continue the fight.

“They never thought the second generation would take on the victimhood of the first; there was always a sense — it sounds really perverse — when the victims are out of the way, it is going to settle down,” says Ms Richardson.

The deeper question is why a new generation of South Koreans are so determined to hold young Japanese responsible for things their great-grandparents did to each other. Historians point to a number of factors unique to South Korea and Japan. First, and perhaps most crucial, is the postwar history of South Korea — riven first by a savage civil war with the north, partition and then repressive military rule before democracy finally arrived in 1987.

Historian Bruce Cumings says a “true horror” of Japan’s rule was that Koreans — who increasingly filled bureaucratic, police and judicial roles during the later, harshest period of wartime rule — had to mobilise their own countrymen and women into servitude. “Japan fractured the Korean psyche, pitting Korean against Korean with consequences that continue to our time,” he wrote in his book *Korea’s Place in the Sun*.



Park Chung-hee in 1964. The president signed the normalisation pact with Japan a year later © Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images

South Korea never had the psychological closure of a war of liberation to settle accounts with Japan. Rather, its freedom flowed from Japan’s defeat in the second world war. Further deepening the internal divide is the success and prominence in contemporary South Korea of rich and powerful families alleged to have profited by aligning themselves with Japanese zaibatsu, or conglomerates, often derided as “collaborators”. These divisions now underpin partisan politics in South Korea, with conservatives lambasted by progressives, who align with Mr Moon, for being “pro-Japan”.

For Mr Moon, attacking Japan is attacking his political foes and reinforcing his core support. “Moon is using a foreign policy argument to target a domestic political issue,”

says one diplomat based in Seoul. Insiders from Mr Moon’s ruling party concede that the issue plays well for a government that is struggling to fulfil promises on the economy and North Korea.

But for many Koreans, Mr Moon’s actions also reflect their firm belief that agreements signed between Seoul and Tokyo — especially the critical 1965 deal that normalised relations — never had their consent and thus lack legitimacy.



Protesters in Seoul during a weekly anti-Japanese demonstration in support of comfort women. Patience is running thin in Japan for what some Japanese see as South Korea’s unreasonable demands for more apologies © AFP/Getty Images

The 1965 treaty was signed by authoritarian ruler Park Chung-hee and sparked such public outrage at the time that US officials recommended Park introduce martial law in response. The 2015 settlement over comfort women was signed by his daughter Park Geun-hye, Mr Moon’s predecessor, who was impeached and jailed after mass protests over corruption.

“Many people looking at these developments take it back to the 1965 treaty. That is what laid the foundation for what is going on now because it was essentially a time bomb; it didn’t have popular support,” says Ms Richardson.

Not only did the South Korean government of 1965 lack legitimacy, it also lacked leverage. China was embroiled in the cultural revolution, the Soviet Union was a cold war ally of the North, and Japan — at the peak of its explosive economic growth — was indispensable for South Korea to develop.

“Fifty years later, South Korea is in a much stronger position. Now China is the most necessary partner, not Japan. Koreans think: ‘Why should we have to respect the 1965 agreement that was concluded when we were not equal?’” says Hajime Izumi, a Korea specialist at Tokyo International University.



Moon Jae-in and Shinzo Abe. The Japanese prime minister has torn up the diplomatic playbook by taking the spat with Mr Moon's South Korea into the economic sphere, slapping export controls on chemicals vital to the Korean semiconductor industry © AFP/Getty Images

For Korea, then, its history with Japan speaks to a long list of national traumas which have never been properly addressed. And because it can be politically profitable to exploit the issue, in whatever form, it comes up time and again. Yet that ignores how Korean frustration plays in Japan.

In the 1990s, when South Korea was newly democratic and the suffering of the comfort women first came to light, when several women broke decades of silence to speak out about the issue, most Japanese people were willing to address their history. That led to apologies such as Obuchi's and the establishment of the Asian Women's Fund in 1995 to research the history of the comfort women and make recompense, funded by donations from the Japanese public as a way round the 1965 treaty. The apologies were stilted, but they were made — and accepted.

Yet from Japan's perspective, these efforts were for nothing. Korean activists urged former comfort women not to take money from the fund because it did not come directly from the Japanese state. Whatever apology Tokyo made, it was not judged sincere. Whenever one issue was settled a new one arose: if not comfort women, then forced labour or the Rising Sun flag.



In his 2017 bestseller, 'Let's Apologise to South Korea', the nationalist novelist Naoki Hyakuta sarcastically says sorry for building South Korea's railways, spreading basic education and ending feudal practices © Aflo/Shutterstock

“How can we negotiate more with a country that ignores past agreements and doesn't just move the goalposts but destroys the goal itself?” says Yoshitaka Shindo, a Japanese member of parliament and former communications minister known for his uncompromising stance on territorial disputes with Japan's neighbours, including Korea.

Slowly, the Japanese public has tired of Korean demands for apology. This year, the percentage of Japanese people with a negative impression of South Korea overtook the percentage of South Koreans with a negative view of Japan in an annual poll conducted by Genron NPO, a think-tank.

Japan itself has changed as well. In the 1990s, the pacifist left was still strong, and people with memories of the war held power. Since then, there has been a nationalist backlash against the apologies already made, especially after the liberal Asahi newspaper was forced to retract a series of false stories about the comfort women.

In his 2017 bestseller, *Let's Apologise to South Korea*, the nationalist novelist Naoki Hyakuta sarcastically says sorry for building South Korea's railways, spreading basic education and ending feudal practices. Japan's nationalists say Korea's version of history is unfair — pointing out, for example, that many of the comfort women were Japanese — although their own views often stray into revisionism, denial or belittlement of Imperial Japan's dark deeds.

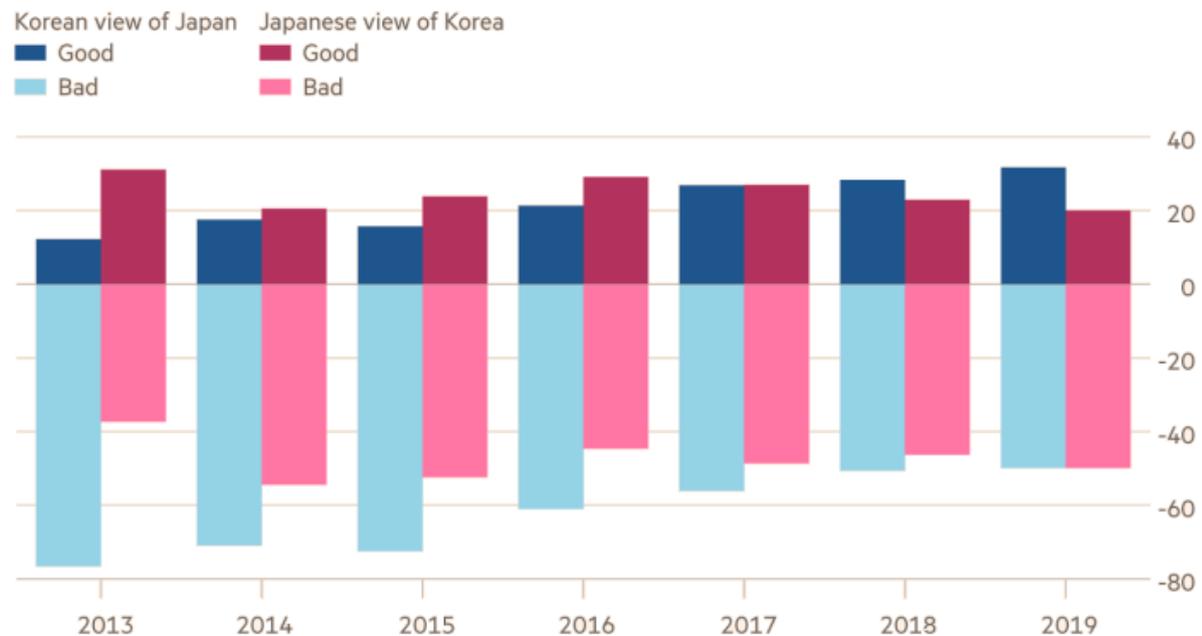
The 2015 comfort women deal, struck at some political cost to Mr Abe but renounced

almost immediately by Mr Moon, was the last straw. Tokyo has no interest in another compromise. “The Koreans think they can turn up the heat and Japan will always respond,” says Mr Shindo. “They don’t understand the level of disappointment and anger in Japan.”

According to diplomats, there is a continuing dialogue between the two foreign ministries, but almost no communication at the level that matters: between Mr Moon and Mr Abe. With the US all but absent from the traditional role of mediator between its fractious allies, it is hard to find any escape route while the two leaders remain in office.

South Koreans’ attitude to Japan is improving despite tensions

% of people who have a good/bad impression of the other country



Source: Genron NPO
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Further strife would be painful for both sides. The two economies are tightly integrated and face a near-identical challenge from the rise of China. “I think it’s important for both sides to reaffirm that they need each other. That’s especially true economically,” says Mr Izumi.

Aside from their historical disputes, young Koreans and Japanese are closer than ever. The K-pop bands that carry Marymond mementos have huge followings in Japan. Japanese novelists top the sales charts in Korea.

“Koreans are very patriotic. They really love their country. If someone is demonstrating then everyone speaks out,” says one woman in her twenties with Korean and Japanese family, who asked to remain anonymous. “Japanese people are very cool. If you speak

out about something like this they wonder if you're a nationalist, if you're rightwing.”

But none of her friends in either country, she says, link the historical argument to individuals on the other side. With the likelihood that the dispute will get worse before it gets better, those young people may be the best hope for a resolution between the two neighbours.

Additional reporting by Kang Buseong in Seoul